

University of California Eyes Admission Changes

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SAN FRANCISCO—The University of California's admissions standards would undergo their most far-reaching overhaul in decades under a faculty proposal that would allow students who have not completed the prescribed college-prep courses or earned minimum test scores to have their applications considered.

Starting with the freshmen class of 2012, the revised policy also would promise a spot on one of UC's nine undergraduate campuses for all students who graduate in the top 9 percent of their senior classes, compared with the 4 percent now promised admission.

The changes, scheduled to be discussed by the university's governing board on Wednesday, are designed to ensure the state is making room in its premier public colleges for promising students who are overlooked under current qualification requirements, said Mark Rashid, who chaired the faculty committee that developed the proposal.

“This represents the biggest change in (UC's) eligibility policy since there has been an eligibility policy,” said Rashid, who teaches engineering at UC Davis.

The revisions are important because UC historically has accepted all students who meet its admission standards, which since the early 1960s have been set to reach the top 12.5 percent, or one-eighth, of high school graduates statewide. This year's formula, for instance, assures students who earn a minimum 3.0 grade point average in 15 required classes and certain SAT or ACT scores a place at a UC school,

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though not necessarily the campus of their choice.

Under the faculty plan, the guaranteed admission target would drop to about 9.7 percent to create space for students who have not met the eligibility criteria by the end of their junior years, as is currently required, but who can demonstrate they are on the right track with classes and preliminary test scores.

Such students would not be promised slots within the system up front, but would be “entitled to review” by individual campuses that could factor in such elements as their backgrounds and extracurricular activities before deciding to offer admission.

Providing such a “window of opportunity” would put the University of California more in line with the admission practices of private colleges, as well as with the University of

Colorado and some other public university systems, said David Longacre, president of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

“They are going to look at people's assets more broadly than what was captured by the SAT and a set of courses. That is a pretty positive model, and a difficult one to challenge,” Longacre said.

The proposal, which has been in development for two years and was approved on a 38-12 vote last month by the legislative arm of the university's Academic Senate, has not been without critics, however.

By moving away from a standardized, in or out admissions formula, toward one that allows for some subjectivity, UC would be abandoning a principle that has made it a leader in higher education for almost half a century, said Saul Geiser, a UC Berkeley education professor.

“The proposal eliminates a central feature of the 'social contract' between the University of California and the citizens of the state—any student who works hard in high school and meets UC's established eligibility requirements is guaranteed admission to the UC system,” Geiser said. “Rather than being assured of admission to the UC system, students will be subject to the uncertainties of each campus' admissions.”

But Rashid said his committee, which is charged by the Board of Regents with revising the freshman eligibility policy, found that the current system did not produce unyielding equality, but was a model of “structural unfairness” that penalizes students from less-privileged backgrounds.

“If you are in that eligible cohort, you are visible to the university. You are guaranteed admission somewhere within the system. If you are not in that cohort, you are as good as invisible to the system. You don't even get to make your case,” he said.

Committee members were disturbed to learn, for instance, that many of the 11,000 high school seniors who apply to UC each year but are denied admission have higher GPA's and test scores than the average for those who do get in, he said.

In many cases, the higher-performing students were deemed ineligible because they missed one or two required courses or they failed to take the two specialized SAT “subject” tests UC requires along with the general reasoning test that covers writing, reading and math.

“Demographically, they look far more like the state of California than the fully eligible pool,” Rashid said. “These are students we should be bending over backward as a public institution to be fair to, and yet we are bouncing them for these silly reasons.”

Besides creating the new “entitled to review” category and expanding the automatically eligible pool to include the top 9 percent from every public and private school, the proposal would eliminate the two SAT subject tests as an entrance requirement. UC, which started mandating the subject tests as a condition of admission during the 1970s, is the only

large public university system to require them, Rashid said.

Taken together, the changes would allow about 20 percent of the roughly 350,000 students who graduate from California high schools each year to be considered for admission to UC campuses, up from the current 12.5 percent, Rashid said. But again, only about 9.7 percent would be guaranteed admission if they apply, he said.

Statistical models run by the faculty committee suggest that if the regents adopt the recommendations, few students who would be admitted under the current rules would be excluded while many more students regarded as ineligible now would be accepted. The main difference is that more students would need to accept referrals to the less-popular schools, an option few freshmen exercise now, according to Rashid.

After being discussed by a regents' committee on Wednesday, the proposal is expected to come back before the full board before the end of the year.

Lt. Gov. John Garamendi, who serves as a regent, said he even though "it's destined to be revised and debated," the proposal represents a promising start toward addressing shortcomings that have undermined the admissions process for years.

"It's very clear there are intelligent individuals who, for no fault of their own, are unable to get the classes they need to meet the current requirements," Garamendi said. "It's important that the regents and the administration take a hard look at addressing that which is a known problem."